

Theory, Practice, and the Future of Developmental Education

By Carl J. Chung

Establishing a theoretical base for the field is about more than adopting theoretical resources or creatively combining them.

ABSTRACT: The guiding premise of this article is that developmental education and learning assistance programs will continue to be undervalued and vulnerable as long as there is no overarching, shared theoretical framework that practitioners can (and want to) call their own. The traditional approach to addressing this theory crisis has been to import theories from outside the field. This article presents an alternative approach. Advantages and benefits of a practice-oriented approach are identified and briefly discussed.

Given that 30% of all students entering postsecondary institutions in this country require some form of “developmental” coursework (Boylan, 1999; Breneman & Haarlow, 1998), it seems reasonable to presume that developmental education and learning assistance would be thriving. However, as Boylan, Saxon, and Link (1999) document, developmental education is, overall, presented to the public as a “necessary evil” (p. 17) that exists due to the poor education students receive in high school, that requires an exorbitant proportion of taxpayer dollars, and that ought to be limited in scope (Hebel, 1999; Healy, 1998). Clearly there are economic, political, and historical factors contributing to this oversimplified picture that are beyond anyone’s control. And yet the question remains, when budget cuts occur or the political climate changes, why are the status, legitimacy, and perceived value of developmental education programs so quickly and so easily challenged?

The guiding thesis of this article is that part of the answer to this question involves the paucity of theoretical discussions and the lack of a shared theoretical framework among developmental education and learning assistance professionals. This lack of theory and its negative consequences have been noted by a number of commentators. In an interview, Hunter Boylan asserts “The most successful programs are theory based. They don’t just provide random intervention; they intervene according to the tenets of various theories of adult intellectual and personal development” (Stratton, 1998, p. 33). Collins and Bruch (2000) also stress the importance of theory: “Given the gains to be made through the pro-

cess of vigorously theorizing our practice, ‘developmental education’ as simply a hodgepodge of contingent local practices guided by inexplicit and largely unintentional theoretical frameworks is no longer good enough” (p. 19). Finally, Spann and McCrimmon (1998) characterize the importance of theory as follows:

The field of developmental education currently faces an identity crisis. For the most part, it has little knowledge of its roots or a widely understood and articulated philosophy, a body of common knowledge, or a commonly accepted set of theoretical assumptions congruent with that philosophy. (p. 44)

The “theory crisis” in developmental education is, however, not straightforward. There are differing interpretations of what exactly the crisis is and what might solve it. There is some support for the notion that the theoretical resources already exist from the definition of developmental education, for example (National Association for Developmental Education, 2001). Theories of human learning and development provide a suitable foundation and framework for the work of developmental educators and learning assistance professionals (Boylan, 2002), and the real challenge is getting practitioners to embrace and apply these theories.

In contrast to Boylan, Collins and Bruch (2000) stress the critical importance of an “interdisciplinary theoretical framework” (p. 20). For Collins and Bruch, theories of human development are among the ingredients that need to be combined in order to form a theoretical framework that can bring coherence to the “befuddling terrain of ‘developmental education’” (p. 21) and its many subdisciplines. Finally, I interpret Spann and McCrimmon’s (1998) call to identify a body of “common knowledge” and “common theoretical assumptions” (p. 44) to imply that establishing a theoretical base for the field is about more than adopting existing theoretical resources or creatively combining them. It is about forging a new theoretical perspective.

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Although issues and problems surrounding theory have plagued higher education in the United States since the 1900s (Lagemann, 2000), the subdisciplines that can be clustered together under the labels “developmental education” and “learning assistance” have more at stake. More specifically, without a firm theoretical foundation, developmental educators and learning assistance professionals will continue to have a hard time articulating a clear professional identity (Boylan, 2002; Casazza, 1999; Casazza & Silverman, 1996), legitimating their work in the face of ongoing criticism (Lundell & Collins, 1999), communicating effectively among subgroups, and enhancing the overall quality of both practice and scholarship (Boylan, 2002). In this way, adequately addressing the lack of a clear theoretical base in developmental education is intertwined with the maturation of the field as a more viable part of higher education.

In this article, I discuss two ways of dealing with the theory crisis: a “theory-oriented approach” and a “practice-oriented approach.” As the two approaches are developed, I will also challenge conventional interpretations of theory and the relationship between theory and practice. By questioning conventional wisdom in this manner, I will show why developmental educators and learning assistance professionals should make practice the foundation of an overarching theory of developmental education and help build a profession of scholar-practitioners.

The Theory-Oriented Approach to Developing a Theoretical Framework

If developmental education and learning assistance are indeed suffering a crisis of theory, then the theory-oriented approach offers an obvious solution: Deal with the crisis by exposing practitioners to more theories and by encouraging them to be more explicit in basing their practices on solid research findings that support those theories. This has been the prevailing approach, and it accepts traditional conceptions of theory, practice, and research.

The commonsense approach can be implemented in different ways. For example, theory workshops targeting seasoned practitioners can efficiently present the latest theoretical developments in specific areas such as composition, English-as-a-second-language, reading, tutoring, or counseling. Including such workshops (and some funding assistance) as part of regional or national meetings could help make theory more accessible to busy developmental education practitioners.

The Internet is also a valuable resource,

with a variety of sites dedicated to educational theory and theoreticians. For example, Kearsley (2003) maintains a website called TIP (theory into practice) which contains useful overviews of 50 theories of learning and instruction, along with references. Developing something similar to Kearsley's site specifically for developmental educators and learning assistance professionals could also be useful to the development of theoretical underpinnings.

The previous two examples strive to make existing theoretical frameworks available to practitioners. Some developmental educators are also actively trying to create new theories for the field. Wambach, Brothen, and Dikel (2000), for example, showcase self-regulation as the key element of their theory. Self-regulation is crucial for developmental students because it is necessary for independence, maturity, and self-direction. Drawing on the work of developmental psychologists, Wambach et al. argue that students need to

Developmental educators and learning assistance professionals should make practice the foundation of an overarching theory of developmental education.

be taught self-regulation in addition to course content and that the former can be achieved by creating an environment that is both demanding and yet responsive.

A quite different new theoretical perspective is put forth by Lundell and Collins (1999). They highlight the work of James Paul Gee, a social linguist, and his notion of “discourse” as a worthwhile theoretical starting point. A discourse is a complex and multifaceted theoretical construct that incorporates social norms, ways of using signs and language, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. As Lundell and Collins summarize, discourses are nothing short of “ways of being in the world” (p. 12). The relevance of discourses to developmental education and learning assistance is that underprepared, at-risk students very often have a primary discourse that is at odds with the secondary discourses they must assimilate in order to succeed in college.

Finally, there is the work of Martha Casazza and Sharon Silverman, which differs in important respects from the examples discussed thus far. In their 1996 book, *Learning Assistance and Developmental Education*, Casazza and Silverman set out to “construct a

new model of practice” (p. xi) for the field. But I believe they accomplish more than this. Casazza and Silverman argue that learning assistance professionals and developmental educators ultimately share a common identity; provide a brief historical overview of the field; synthesize a wealth of theoretical perspectives; advocate a model that integrates theory, research, reflection, and practice (TRRP); summarize the main characteristics of several successful programs; present the basics of doing quality research; and articulate underlying shared principles that might constitute a bona fide professional identity. In this way, *Learning Assistance and Developmental Education* anticipates the “theory crisis” and actually attempts to address the concerns raised by Boylan (Stratton, 1998), Collins and Bruch (2000), and Spann and McCrimmon (1998).

More specifically, Casazza and Silverman (1996) address Boylan's (Stratton, 1998) concerns by assigning a central role to research in their TRRP model and by summarizing four main theoretical perspectives that can serve as the source for that research (behavioral, cognitive, motivational, and adult learning approaches). By stressing the importance of ongoing critical self-reflection by practitioners, Casazza and Silverman also provide a framework that would allow practitioners to “vigorously theorize [their] practice,” thus addressing the concerns of Collins and Bruch (2000, p. 19). And, although one might criticize Casazza and Silverman for “merely synthesizing” existing theories instead of creating a new one, at the very least their approach calls for practitioners to engage theory intentionally and explicitly. Finally, Casazza and Silverman address Spann and McCrimmon's (1998) concerns by presenting the historical roots of developmental education and learning assistance and by identifying shared philosophical assumptions that could serve as the core of a professional identity.

At this point, it is tempting to conclude that the theory-oriented approach to the theory crisis has adequate means at its disposal to address the crisis. Perhaps there are practical obstacles to overcome (such as practitioners being too busy), but all in all the shape of the solution is clear—the challenge is to implement it effectively. But, unless “rank and file” developmental education practitioners acknowledge a crisis of theory and embrace a theoretical framework along the lines of Wambach et al. (2000), Lundell and Collins (1999), or Casazza and Silverman (1996), little will change. However, it is uncertain whether practitioners even recognize a need for more attention to theory, let alone consciously embrace one (Chung & Brothen, 2002). If practitioners were in fact actively and enthusiastically

cally embracing the framework of *Learning Assistance and Developmental Education* (Casazza & Silverman, 1996), then one might expect to find increasing rates of citation of the book in the major developmental education journals. Increasing citation rates would be one indication that developmental educators and learning assistance professionals were in fact influenced by Casazza and Silverman's framework in their scholarly work. A manual review of *The Journal of College Reading and Learning* (JCRL), *The Journal of Developmental Education* (JDE), *The Learning Assistance Re-*

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	Total
JCRL	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
JDE	1	0	4	2	0	2	1	10
TLAR	?	0	?	3	1	1	1	6
RTDE	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	3
Total	1	0	5	5	1	4	2	19

Figure 1. Citations in major developmental education journals of *Developmental Education and Learning Assistance* from 1997 to 2003.

view (TLAR), and *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education* (RTDE) for such citations between 1997 and March 2003 produced the results shown in Figure 1.

To the extent that the reviewed journals accurately represent current issues and thinking among developmental educators, the data demonstrate that *Learning Assistance and Developmental Education* has not garnered widespread application among developmental education or learning assistance professionals. If Casazza and Silverman's (1996) framework is, in fact, being adopted and having a significant impact on the field, then a gradual but noticeable increase in the frequency of citations and an increase in the number of different venues in which the work is cited would be expected. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Although the citation data may provide some insight regarding the impact of Casazza and Silverman's (1996) work, two important limitations need to be kept in mind. First, it may be too early to fairly judge the impact of *Learning Assistance and Developmental Education*. After all, 7 years represent a rather narrow "window of opportunity" to establish an overarching theoretical framework for a field! And second, a significant number of developmental education and learning assistance professionals do not (or simply cannot) attend conferences or subscribe to research journals (Chung & Brothen, 2002), and so the citation data do not reveal what is happening among this important group of practitioners. Nonetheless, the data do show that there has not been significant use of Casazza and Silverman's ideas yet, at least not among those writing journal articles.

The interpretation of the data I will defend calls into question the theory-oriented approach as an adequate way of dealing with the theory crisis. By doing so, I do not mean to question the value of theory itself, but rather the effectiveness of the prevailing approach to generating theory: a top-down import model. In other words, traditionally theory is taught in graduate school courses by way of textbooks and seminal figures (e.g., Dewey, Piaget, Perry, Chickering, Vygotsky, etc.). The abstract truths of theory can then be used to focus, guide, and modify practice in the classroom, learning center, or counselor's office. But the "movement" is from theory (that is abstract, objective, and pure) to practice (that is concrete, subjective, and messy). The theoretical frameworks are also primarily "imported" from outside the field of developmental education, be it from psychology, human devel-

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opment, philosophy of education, cognitive science, or, more recently, from postmodern sources.

So, what is wrong with the theory-oriented, top-down, import model? Basically, as far as developmental education is concerned, it simply hasn't worked. No common theoretical framework or group of core assumptions have emerged to inform the work of developmental educators, even though there are numerous constructive citations and applications of Angelo, Astin, Bandura, Baxter-Magolda, Bloom, Chickering, Cross, Dewey, Freire, Maslow, Maxwell, Perry, Piaget, Tinto, and Vygotsky in the field's major journals. Put differently, if the field is in fact a hodge-podge of local practices, it is unclear how a similar hodge-podge of imported theories is going to provide a central focus and foundation. The theory crisis in developmental education and learning assistance is not, therefore, simply about a lack of theory per se; it is about a lack of an overarching, authentic, common theoretical framework that developmental educators can and want to call their own.

Another shortcoming of the theory-oriented approach is that it unfairly burdens practitioners with the responsibility of acquiring, interpreting, and applying theory. Research-

ers are churning out or refining relevant and possibly useful theoretical findings all the time; is it not up to practitioners to find the time to seek out and learn those theories that will improve practice? The problem is that "theory" as it is traditionally conceptualized and produced by researchers is often of little use to practitioners. For example, a recent study (Kezar, 2000) employing focus groups examined how practitioners and researchers made sense of higher education research. She found that researchers are rewarded for producing work that is "highly conceptual, methodologically sound, and descriptive; that raises questions; and that (to some degree) is creative..." (pp. 17-18). Unfortunately, researchers are not usually rewarded for producing work that

has relevance to practice, for good writing, for writing for an audience, for choosing an important topic, for being visionary, for being insightful, for providing perspective, for being solution oriented, for understanding the landscape of higher education, or for producing concise formats for practitioners. (p. 18)

As Kezar summarizes, researchers "might be responding to a larger academic system that rewards an orientation to academic culture and a separation from practice" (p. 18). To the extent that Kezar is right, then practitioners have ample justification for their apathy to theory as produced and presented by traditional university researchers.

A different approach that brackets traditional conceptions of theory and practice may be better embraced by practitioners. A meaningful and useful theoretical framework for developmental education does not necessarily need to originate from another discipline, and it does not necessarily need to originate as a highly abstract set of principles that can constrain, guide, or be applied to practice. Instead, I believe developmental educators already possess the elements of a rich, albeit tacit, theoretical perspective in the form of their day-to-day practice, experience, and "know-how" working with at-risk students. The challenge is to articulate the field's unique theoretical perspective from the foundation of practice, that is, from the bottom up.

The Practice-Oriented Approach to Developing a Theoretical Framework

To clarify how practice can help provide a theoretical foundation for developmental education, I describe the standard view of theory, practice, and their relationship in a

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WHAT WORKS:

Research-Based Best Practices in Developmental Education

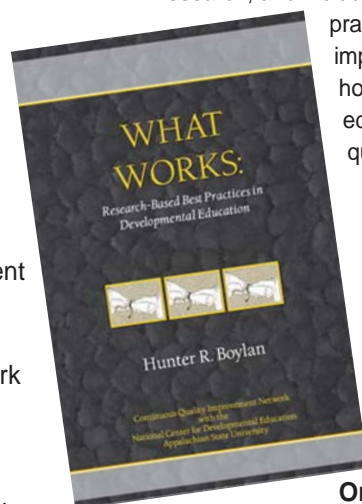
By Hunter R. Boylan, Ph.D.

A joint project of the
**Continuous Quality
Improvement Network**
with the
**National Center for
Developmental Education**

This book combines results from the recent “Best Practices in Developmental Education” benchmarking study by the Continuous Quality Improvement Network and the American Productivity & Quality Center with findings from a decade of research by the National Center for Developmental Education to create a guide to the best models and techniques available for the professional developmental educator.

The text describes each best practice in detail, along with its supporting research, and includes an example of a college or university applying that practice. Following every example is a list of tips for implementation. The contents focus on research regarding how to design, implement, and evaluate developmental education and learning assistance programs and address questions such as:

- q What are the most effective organizational arrangements for developmental education?
- q What classroom techniques result in the most learning for developmental students?
- q How should developmental programs be evaluated?
- q What support services work best for developmental students?



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little more detail first, and then discuss the work of Schon (1987) and Jarvis (1999). Both Schon and Jarvis critique the standard view of theory and practice and offer alternatives that place a greater emphasis on practice and the practitioner. By appealing to and expanding upon Schon's concept of "reflection-in-action" and Jarvis' idea of a "personal theory," a practice-oriented solution to the theory crisis begins to take shape.

Traditionally, theory and practice were thought to be completely different. Theoretical knowledge was thought to be objective, pure, and somehow more basic than the knowledge of practice, with the latter often dismissed as "merely" the application of theory (Kessels & Korthagen, 1996; Lagemann, 2000; Schon, 1987). Theories were viewed as repositories of universal truths or general principles. It was assumed that learning theory was the primary goal of professional education and that the details of day-to-day practice were simply "technical skills" (Schon, p. 9) that could be readily picked up during a brief internship or even just "on the job." In this way, theory and theoreticians were privileged over practice. Problems that arose at the level of practice were to be passed on to research institutions to be solved through modifications to existing theory or the creation of new theoretical knowledge (Lagemann, 2000, p. 19).

Both Schon (1987) and Jarvis (1999) resist this traditional picture. Schon, for example, focuses on professional education (law, medicine, engineering, education). He argues that one outcome of uncritically accepting the traditional picture is what he calls "technical rationality." From this point of view, practitioners are simply instrumental problem solvers who "solve well-formed instrumental problems by applying theory and technique derived from systematic, preferably scientific, knowledge" (Schon, pp. 3-4, 34). In this way, all problems encountered in practice can be solved by engaging in rule-governed thinking that is guided by an appropriate theory.

According to Schon (1987), the problem with technical rationality is that practitioners often find themselves in situations where theory simply cannot help. For example, some situations are just too complex, messy, or indeterminate to simply apply existing theory; others are unique and not covered by existing theory; and still others involve conflicts of values and so go beyond existing theory (Schon, pp. 4-7). In such situations, Schon believes that competent practitioners move forward and deal with the problem at hand by appealing to a kind of practice-based knowl-

edge; they do not pull back and seek out a new theory. Schon calls this practice-based knowledge "professional artistry":

Artistry is an exercise of intelligence, a kind of knowing, though different in crucial respects from our standard model of professional knowledge [based upon technical rationality]. It is not inherently mysterious; it is rigorous in its own terms; and we can learn a great deal about it . . . by carefully studying the performance of unusually competent performers. (p. 13)

For Schon (1987), professional artistry can only be understood if one adopts an "epistemology of practice" (p. 35) that divests itself of the assumptions and worldview endemic to technical rationality. This alternative epistemology of practice has two main parts. First, Schon argues that the practical knowledge associated with professional artistry is *tacit* (p. 22). That is, expert practitio-

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ners cannot always fully articulate exactly what they know or how they know it in a given situation. Given their past experience, "know how," and awareness of the details of a particular situation, expert practitioners just have a "feel" for what will work or how to move forward (and if they are indeed "unusually competent performers," they are usually successful).

Inevitably, however, the expert practitioner will encounter an anomaly, something new, where the usual approaches or techniques do not work. This brings us to the second part of Schon's (1987) alternative epistemology of practice. In such cases, he argues, the expert practitioner will engage in "reflection-in-action" (p. 26). For example, the doctor faced with a completely new illness, the lawyer faced with an unusual pattern of argument, or the teacher faced with a heretofore unexperienced challenge to student learning will each have to step back and "think up and try out new actions intended to explore the newly observed phenomena, test . . . tentative understandings of them, or affirm the moves [that have been] invented to change things for the better" (p. 28). In such cases, the practitioner is neither appealing to nor applying existing theory so much as improvising and creating theory on the spot for *this* particular situation and context. Schon believes that by observing expert practitioners as they reflect-in-practice it is possible to get

a glimpse of the tacit knowledge that they themselves may have difficulty articulating and communicating after the fact.

Jarvis (1999) also provides a useful alternative to the traditional conception of theory and practice. In *The Practitioner-Researcher*, he argues that knowledge is proliferating and changing so rapidly in our information-saturated society that practitioners must engage in an open-ended process of reflection and research on their own in order to keep abreast of new developments, to make informed decisions, and to maintain their level of expertise (Jarvis, pp. 7, 165). This research, however, is local, pragmatic, and small-scale in comparison to usual notions of research, and its main goal is not to generate new theoretical knowledge but rather to provide the practitioner with new understanding or techniques that work in a particular context (Jarvis). Jarvis conceives of practice itself as a laboratory of sorts, in which practitioners must continually experiment: "They have to experiment with their practice and learn from it so they can devise a form of practice that works for them and build up their own body of knowledge about their ways of doing things" (p. 90). This individual "body of knowledge" can be thought of as a "personal theory" (p. 139).

Jarvis (1999) characterizes a personal theory as a repository of knowledge that has been validated by the experience of a particular practitioner. As such, personal theories are unique, dynamic, and subjective, and it is not possible to generalize from one practitioner's personal theory to another practitioner's situation. Even though Jarvis worries that his account implies that practitioners are doomed to remain "fragmented" by their individualistic personal theories, he does not discuss at what level this fragmentation occurs or how pervasive it might be.

Schon (1987) and Jarvis (1999) each reject the traditional hegemony of theory over practice and stress the centrality and value of the latter. By doing so, they provide a much-needed vindication of practice and practitioners. But reflection-in-action and personal theories can also be used by developmental educators and learning assistance professionals to tackle the theory crisis.

Practice-Oriented Approach in Action

Building upon these two ideas, a practice-oriented approach to the theory crisis would proceed in three stages:

1. Practitioners engage in reflection-in-action. The goal here is for practitioners to critically reflect on what they do while they are doing it. Schon (1987) says that expert practitioners automatically do this when they

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encounter an anomaly. But as Jarvis (1999) points out, experts are able to “problematize” any given situation to keep learning and avoid operating on auto-pilot. Even nonexpert practitioners stand to benefit from this sort of sustained self-reflection (Casazza & Silverman, 1996; Silverman & Casazza, 2000). However, given that self-reflection can be potentially a recipe for disaster, it is difficult not to become self-conscious and thereby impede natural, practical responses. Reflection-in-action might be facilitated by any of the following: videotaping the practitioner in the classroom, learning center, or counselor’s office; engaging in mutual peer review with colleagues; keeping a reflective journal for a particular class being taught, a particular time frame in a learning center, or a particular group of individuals being counseled; or establishing mentoring partnerships between an expert and a novice practitioner. In addition, Angelo and Cross’ book, *Classroom Assessment Techniques* (1993), contains a wealth of specific ideas to help instructors begin reflecting on their practice as well as “The Teaching Goals Inventory” (TGI) to help instructors identify key “clusters” of pedagogical focus. Using the TGI, instructors can quickly, easily, and systematically begin to make their own day-to-day practice an object of study and reflection.

Although such critical self-reflection is intrinsically worthwhile, for the purpose of developing theory from practice, it is useful to have a particular outcome in mind that will help structure and focus practitioners’ self-reflections.

2. Based upon their reflection-in-action, practitioners articulate a personal theory. For Jarvis (1999), a personal theory is a collection of what has stood the test of successful practice. I want to broaden this to something more inclusive: personal theory as essentially a “personal philosophy of” teaching, tutoring, or counseling and, as such, inclusive of personal assumptions, goals, principles, values, and explanations and justifications. So it is not enough to produce a list of “what works for me in these situations”; there must also be some indication of why a particular technique or approach works, what it should accomplish, why it is a good thing, what assumptions undergird the technique, and so forth. A personal theory, then, is a package of information that defines a practitioner’s worldview and offers a comprehensive picture of that individual’s approach to their work. For developmental educators and learning assistance professionals, the process of articulating personal theories promises to bring to light much that is tacit and taken for granted in day-to-day practice.

3. Compare personal theories at different levels and find commonalities. Finally, a representative sample of personal theories from a variety of developmental educators and learning assistance professionals can be collected and studied. By scrutinizing what these personal theories have in common—goals, values, techniques, assumptions, and so on—both within and across core groupings and levels of organization, it is possible to identify and articulate the basic elements of a theoretical framework that developmental educators and learning assistance professionals have embedded in their practice. These elements can form the beginnings of a unique theoretical perspective that is grounded in and arises out of the strength of development education: its unwavering commitment to quality practice that promotes student success.

The practice-oriented approach to solving the theory crisis outlined herein has several advantages over traditional theory-oriented approaches. First, it builds upon the

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strength of the field of developmental education and does not dwell upon a perceived shortcoming of theory, as that term is usually understood. Second, it enlists and values the experiences and input of all practitioners, not just those with Ph.D.’s or those working at research institutions. Third, it offers a concrete procedure for helping practitioners think about the theoretical implications of practice that has a clear goal and does not depend upon lofty conceptual debates. And, finally, if successful, the practice-oriented approach promises to result in an authentic, overarching theoretical framework that developmental educators will naturally want to call their own.

Three Challenges to Implementing the Practice-Oriented Approach

To successfully implement the practice-oriented approach, developmental educators and learning assistance professionals will have to overcome a number of challenges. The first challenge involves the status of developmental education: Is it a coherent “field” within higher education or simply a lingering collection of programs that emerged fully during the 1970s? In other words, “developmental education” as a label applies to a diverse range

of activities that varies with the needs of particular institutions and the vagaries of student demographics. As such, a critic might observe, developmental education programs and services may simply fade away once institutional needs change or students receive adequate secondary educations. If developmental education is only a contingent collection of programs and services and not anything resembling a field or discipline within higher education, then there is little point in worrying about a theoretical framework.

In response to this challenge, I think the growth of the field during the past three decades (Boylan, 2002; Casazza, 1999) speaks for itself. A handful of journals publish a growing body of work, annual conferences occur at both the national and regional levels, and both the National Center for Developmental Education at Appalachian State University and the Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy at the University of Minnesota continue their work on our behalf. Developmental education and learning assistance may not be a well-defined field or discipline yet, but progress is being made in that direction (cf. Casazza & Silverman, 1996; Outcalt, 2002).

Furthermore, it is unclear whether the ultimate goal ought to be to establish a fully fledged field or discipline, as those terms are traditionally understood. As Lagemann (2000) observes with respect to “education” more generally,

many people would insist that education is not itself a discipline. Indeed, because it does not have distinctive methods or a clearly demarcated body of subject matter and is not seen as a tool for the analysis of other subject matters, I would tend to agree. Instead, I see education as a field of study and professional practice that is illuminated by a wide variety of disciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. (p. xiv)

Lagemann’s characterization of education as a “field of study and professional practice” seems to be a valid long-term goal for developmental education and learning assistance. And because the practice-oriented approach to the theory crisis outlined in the last section would promote the discovery of common theoretical elements shared by developmental education and learning assistance professionals, it would, in fact, contribute to furthering this goal.

The second challenge involves the possibility that areas such as, reading, basic writing, ESL, and the learning center/learning

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assistance movement, for example, already have robust theoretical resources at their disposal (Maxwell, 1997; but see Clowes, 1992 for a contrary view). Given that many practitioners define themselves in terms of their specialty within developmental education and thus feel a strong allegiance to that specialty, is it really useful, wise, or even possible to try and pursue a more general and hence more generic theoretical framework for all practitioners? Let me briefly discuss two related responses.

First, allegiance to a specialty does not preclude allegiance to a broader community of developmental education and learning assistance professionals. There are politically expedient reasons why developmental educators should "stick together." As Miles (1984) puts it, "Having a strong, visible national identity establishes credibility and influence with administrative and political decision-makers" (p. 9). In addition, overemphasis and overreliance upon traditional disciplinary divisions to define ourselves threatens to overshadow the very real "shared priorities" common to developmental educators and learning assistance professionals (Miles, p. 6). Thus, more stands to be gained by stressing underlying similarities among disparate practitioners rather than promoting the many obvious differences.

Second, "subfields" of developmental education may not by themselves and in isolation from other "subfields" adequately help at-risk students maximize their chances of success. Developmental education and learning assistance are not "a la carte" endeavors. Instead, more integrated and holistic approaches to teaching and learning are critical. According to Maxwell (1997), "As students have become more diverse, courses have become more integrated.... Basic reading, writing, and mathematics are viewed as processes, not as separate courses" (p. iii). Exploring how different specialties within developmental education approach these "processes" along with actively learning from the more theoretically developed or sophisticated subfields is surely worthwhile. Engaging in the practice-oriented approach can help facilitate this sort of conversation among different developmental education practitioners.

The third challenge centers on the many potentially divisive differences that exist within developmental education and learning assistance. Given the variety of positions (instructors of reading, writing, math, and other courses; tutors; counselors; administrators; faculty who are adjunct, full time, 2 year, 4 year; etc.), the current split of the field into multiple professional organizations, and the

fact that many practitioners are unheard and invisible (that is, do not positively identify themselves as "developmental educators" or "learning assistance professionals," do not attend professional meetings or read journals, etc.), what hope is there that the practice-oriented approach to the theory crisis can produce any common elements? This skepticism parallels Jarvis' (1999) worry about personal theories, namely, that there turn out to be as many theories as there are practitioners. If practice is fragmented, no common theoretical framework seems attainable.

In response to the skeptic, one must acknowledge that personal theories are unique to individuals. But the goal is not to generate a list of specific behaviors or norms to which all developmental educators must subscribe. The goal is something more general: common attitudes, goals, assumptions, and general principles (of instruction, of tutoring, of interacting with students) that cut across some of our many differences. Articulating and

Developmental education and learning assistance are not "a la carte" endeavors.

scrutinizing personal theories is simply one way to get at some of these common elements. I do believe there is hope of finding such common theoretical elements. My conviction comes from the fact that I believe developmental educators as a group probably care more about student success and well-being than any other segment of higher education. As an example, I think I know how the average developmental educator would answer the following questions:

- Do we treat students holistically or reductionistically?
- Do we think in terms of deficits or assets?
- Do we believe in personal interaction with students?
- Do we value and promote diversity?

Taken individually, there is nothing earth-shattering in the list of possible commitments I've sketched in the previous paragraph. But, taken together, there is an inkling of something more—a unique and robust theoretical framework that highlights the commitment of developmental education practitioners to students—a framework that might aptly be called a "pedagogy of caring" (Jarrett, 1991; Noddings, 1992, 2002).

Whether such a pedagogy of caring will in fact emerge as a viable overarching theoretical framework for developmental educators and learning assistance professionals remains an open question. But having practitioners articulate their personal theories and

then scrutinize them with the goal of discovering common theoretical strands will yield additional benefits. First, whatever the outcome of taking a practice-oriented approach to the theory crisis, the process of taking an inventory as a community of practitioners will help identify "what we know." In other words, the work and outcomes associated with the proposed project will be by practitioners and for practitioners. The outcomes will not have originated from outside experts, think tanks, well-meaning government agencies, or not-so-well-meaning state legislatures. The very process of engaging in this project will be constructive because the results will be relevant, believable, and useful.

Second, because the proposed project calls for input from all developmental education and learning assistance constituencies and it requires an examination of similarities among personal theories, engaging in the proposed project promises to highlight what developmental educators have in common. Given the potentially divisive differences previously mentioned, emphasizing the value of these commonalities will help foster a stronger sense of community within the field, encourage dialogue across traditional boundaries, and affirm a more unified sense of professional identity and purpose.

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For Your Information

March

9-13, 2005—National Center for Developmental Education's (NADE) 29th Annual Conference, "Learning and Teaching: Above and Beyond," in Albuquerque, NM. Contact <http://planet.tvi.edu/nade2005> or call Jerry Giles at 801.266.7289 or Bonnie Henrie at 801.863.8311 for more information.

13-15, May 22-24, August 7-9, 2005—The University of Missouri's Supplemental Instruction's (SI) continuing series of Supervisor Workshops in Kansas City, MO. See ad, page 23, for more information.

25, 2005—Call for proposals deadline for College Reading and Learning Association's (CRLA) 38th Annual Conference, "Sailing the Tides of Transition," in Long Beach, CA. See ad, page 29, for more information.

17-20, 2005—American Association for Higher Education's 2005 National Conference on Higher Education, "Courage, Imagination, Action: Rallying the Trendsetters in Higher Education," at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia. For more information, visit www.aahe.org or call 202.293.6440.

April

3-5, 2005—New York College Learning Skills Association's (NYCLSA) 28th Annual Symposium at the historic Otesaga Resort Hotel in Cooperstown, NY. See ad, page 19, for more information.

14-15, 2005—Michigan Developmental Education Consortium's (MDEC) 20th Annual Spring Conference, "Leadership at the Cutting Edge," in Jackson, MI. See ad, page 42, for more information.

16-20, 2005—National Tutoring Association's 13th Annual National Conference, "Tutors: We're on a Mission," at the Renaissance Hotel in Chicago, IL. See ad, page 23, for more information.

30, 2005—Call for proposals deadline for National College Learning Center Association's (NCLCA) 20th Annual Conference, "Honoring our Past: Guiding our Future," at the Wyndham Hotel in downtown Milwaukee, WI. Contact www.nclca.org for more information.

June

12-14, 2005—American Association for Higher Education's 20th Anniversary Assessment Conference, "Charting New Territory," at the Sheraton Centre, Toronto, Canada. Contact: One Dupont Circle, Suite 360 Washington DC 20036-1143, phone 202.293.6440, fax 202.293.0073 or email: info@aahe.org for more information.

13-17, 2005—NCLCA's 2005 Summer Institute, "Excellence in Learning Center Practice and Professionalism," at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside in Kenosha, Wisconsin. See ad, page 23, for more information.

25—July 22, 2005—The National Center for Developmental Education's (NCDE) 26th Kellogg Institute for the Training & Certification of Developmental Educators at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC. See ad, page 19, for more information.

July

27-30, 2005—Noel-Levitz's National Conference on Student Recruitment/Marketing, and Retention at the Grand Hyatt Washington Hotel. Contact Noel-Levitz, 2101 ACT Circle, Iowa City, IA 52245; 800.876.1117, fax 319.337.5274 or email: info@noellelevitz.com for more information.